

Questioning Socio-Ecological Transformations

One of the most vibrant threads within contemporary debates within environmental politics and ethics can be found in writings committed to socio-ecological transformation. Although more conservative arguments can also find a place in contemporary debates – most obviously within preservationist arguments – recent discussions of the Anthropocene, of planetary boundaries, and of degrowth have all in different ways enabled a broader discussion of the necessity for (and desirability of) achieving a fundamental reorganisation of social and socio-ecological relations. For many, perhaps even the majority, it is this commitment to transformation that first drew them to environmental debates: certainly it remains one of the key motivations for my students in pursuing the paths that they do.

As with an earlier issue of the journal this year (see Spash 2016) each of the papers in this issue considers questions of socio-ecological change and transformation. Taken together they represent the wonderful diversity of perspectives on what change might look like, how discourses over transformation come to be co-opted and re-appropriated, what it might mean for liberal values to advocate for a post-growth agenda, and the directions to be taken by the de-growth movement in advocating for specific values. As ever within *Environmental Values*, the philosophical foundations from which these arguments emerge vary as much as the empirical and conceptual focus; however, a sense that something needs to change lies at the heart of each of the papers.

Brand's paper is the first in the issue. He picks up on the dramatic rise in fortunes of the term 'transformation'. Within a remarkably short period of time 'transformation', 'social and ecological transformation', and 'socio-ecological transformation' have achieved the status of buzzwords. Often paired with analyses of 'planetary boundaries', the question of transformation appears to address the multi-faceted nature of current environmental predicaments. Funding bodies have heightened the sense that transformation should now be one of the key concepts for considering the governance challenges posed by our current moment. Nevertheless, as decades of debate over environmentalism and sustainable development demonstrate, for transformation to mean anything other than business as usual, it needs to be filled with critical content. In Brand's view, historical materialism provides the most powerful framework through which the concept of transformation might acquire greater analytical power. The reasons Brand finds for this lie in historical materialism's identification of both a 'subject' and 'object' of transformation. Although often contested, the 'object' is to be found in the environment itself and the 'subject' can be found in the state or governance structures producing specific socio-ecological outcomes. Brand thereby makes an argument for further development of theoretical categories focused on modes of production, capitalist regulation, state and governance, and hegemony.

Scerri's paper is a useful reminder of the shifting meanings of concepts that lose their critical purchase and come to be enrolled within frameworks ostensibly antithetical to those in which they originally developed. Thus, he considers the ways in which strong normative arguments from Deep Ecology have re-emerged within more mainstream arguments as well as among advocates of Corporate Social and Environmental Responsibility (CSER) and Green Growth (GG). Echoing the critique made by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) of the process through which radical ideas are assimilated in order to recuperate and legitimise a growth-oriented capitalism, Scerri questions the radicalism of Deep Ecology. He suggests that the commitment to holism and voluntarism often detracted from the more central critique of human and environmental exploitation and degradation. Settling these ontological questions first, risked ceding philosophical arguments to opponents of more radical socio-ecological proposals.

The need for careful distinctions between perspectives that, on the surface at least, appear to be committed to similar forms of politics is explored within Kanschik's paper. He turns to the differing understandings of 'sufficiency' mobilized within sufficientarianism and eco-sufficiency perspectives. Eco-sufficiency perspectives have come to prominence in recent work on de-growth and suggest a need to draw limits on individual consumption. Sufficientarian perspectives however, have been less concerned with environmental arguments and have arisen more out of a commitment to distributive justice and a desire to ensure all have at least minimal access to resources. Kanschik argues that the two approaches, although ostensibly sharing some similar concerns, are irreconcilable due to the reliance of eco-sufficiency perspectives on a perfectionist notion of the good life. In contrast, sufficientarianist arguments are committed to a pluralistic conception of justice and eschew attempts to delineate the good life. Kanschik urges a more cautious use of 'sufficiency' in environmental justice debates

Romano turns his attention to how the kinds of values considered by Kanschik might acquire a material force. While deeply committed to the principles and values of the degrowth movement (for an excellent introduction to these debates as part of a special issue of the journal, see Whitehead 2013), Romano offers a constructive critique of what he perceives to be its advocacy of horizontality as an organising principle. The problem with this horizontality is that it relies on the very same 'form' used within the growth regime that it seeks to challenge. Romano provides a history of the emergence of the growth regime, identifying a horizontalist period from 1815 to 1929, a verticalist era of social gains from 1930 to 1980 and the emergence of neo-horizontalism alongside neo-liberalism from 1980 onwards. The response from the degrowth movement to this 'horizontal hitch', as Romano frames it, should be to advocate for degrowth values within a verticalist regime capable of making genuine socio-ecological reforms. To abdicate from this responsibility is to surrender

to nationalism and fundamentalism. Romano concludes with a passionate call for European and Mediterranean countries to unite in an alliance against global barbarism: in short, he poses the choice degrowth or barbarism.

This suggestion that environmental degradation threatens liberal democratic regimes becomes crucial to Ferguson's exploration of the relationship between liberalism and economic growth (for an earlier iteration of the debate see the discussion between Piers Stephens and Marcel Wissenburg (Stephens 2001; Wissenburg 2001)). He therefore considers the degree to which a liberal democratic state might be able to move towards a post-growth economy. The question of the relationship between liberalism and economic growth is a long-standing one and Ferguson considers in detail the positions of John Stuart Mill, Ronald Dworkin and Marcel Wissenburg. In the best-known contribution, Mill argues that a stationary state is the most conducive to the furthering of liberal principles and that the emergence of this state is inevitable. Considering why a preference for economic growth has emerged in liberal democracies, Ferguson draws on Moravcsik's explanatory liberal theory. The aggregation of societal preferences for the social goods associated with economic growth, nevertheless pose problems for a move to a post-growth society. However, with economic growth now posing a profound threat to a range of liberal concerns, as well as disrupting socioeconomic and ecological stability, Ferguson argues that liberals should now support a post-growth economy.

Given the serious treatment of the politics of socio-ecological change within each of these pieces, glib references to 'transformation' – whether in competitive funding bids to research councils or by politicians who paradoxically remain deeply committed to preserving the current growth model – are exposed to be hollow. Instead, the complexity of achieving a fairer, more egalitarian and more ecologically sustainable society emerges throughout this issue. However, for each of the authors, this complexity never appears paralysing: indeed each is careful to put forward starting points for scholarly analysis and sometimes also practical action.

As the shock of the EU referendum result still reverberates among many of us in the UK, I remain more convinced than ever that those of us genuinely committed to such socio-ecological transformations must reconnect with the hopes and fears of those so often excluded from the political process and excluded from the gains of economic growth. As Romano notes, a host of authoritarian and xenophobic movements now 'promise protection and communitarian warmth in a regressive frame to people devastated by the fury of globalism'. It therefore seems to me that one of the key challenges must be to reconnect the kind of democratic and practical engagements with environmental values about which I wrote in my previous editorial (2013) with the powerful perspectives on the state, governance, liberalism and degrowth discussed within this issue. Multi-level, as well as multi-faceted, perspectives are needed to respond to the multiple crisis highlighted by Brand. These

multi-level perspectives must surely remain grounded in the myriad ways in which people make sense of, connect with and frame environmental values within their own day-to-day lives.

ALEX LOFTUS

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